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1909

No. 165.

COME MICHAELMAS

A Play in One Act

BY

KEBLE HOWARD

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BY

KEBLE HOWARD *c. Howard*

"Bell, John Keble"

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COME MICHAELMAS.

Produced on Monday, April 26, 1909, at the Adelphi Theatre, London, with the following cast :

John Cogbill (a Young Farmer) . .	Mr. Arthur Soames
Mr. Cogbill (his Father)	Mr. Geo. W. Parte
Mrs. Cogbill (his Mother) . . .	Miss Rose Edouin
Charity	Miss Pearl Keats

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COME MICHAELMAS.

SCENE—*The parlour of Nutlands Farm. Door C. leading to garden. Bay window R. C. Door to house R. Cupboard doors down L. and down R. Old oak panelling. Dustpan on floor down L. Flowers in window and on table. Usual Furniture. Bright sunlight outside window. Garden back-cloth and meadows beyond.*

Time—noon. Period—modern.

JOHN COGBILL, *a big, broad-shouldered young yeoman-farmer, is discovered binding a whip. Enter by door R. MRS. COGBILL, his mother. She has white hair, smoothly brushed back. She wears a clean print dress and an apron. She is peeling a potato.*

MRS C. John, my boy, there's somebody comin' across the home-paddock as you've got something to say to.

JOHN. (*still binding whip*) Who's that, then?

MRS. C. Charity.

JOHN. Oh.

MRS C. (*advancing to him*) God bless you, my boy.

JOHN. Thanks, mother.

MRS. C. I should go straight to the point if I was you. It isn't as though you were strangers to one another after keeping company for seven years. Is it, John?

JOHN. No, mother.

MRS. C. Just tell 'er plump out that me an' the old man are giving up the farm come Michaelmas, and going to live in the Yew Barn House. Then catch hold of her 'and, pretty-like, and ask her if she'll come and be the new mistress of Nutlands Farm. See?

JOHN. Yes, mother.

MRS. C. It 'll all be over in a couple of minutes, won't it?

JOHN. Yes, mother.

MRS. C. Well, put a bit more cheerful face on it, then, my boy. You love 'er, don't you?

JOHN. Oh, yes, mother.

MRS. C. Better than anybody else in the world?

JOHN. Yes, mother—except you.

MRS. C. (*laying her cheek against his sleeve*) Oh, go on with you, yer great silly you! There was never a mother yet who could hold her own against a sweetheart, and never ought to be. I know well enough that you've loved Charity this seven year, and she loves you just the same. (*looking up*) Doesn't she?

JOHN. Yes, mother, I think she does.

MRS. C. Think she does? You know very well she does, and we all know it. And a dear, sweet wife she'll make for yer, bless 'er! Well, I'll get out o' the road. I shall give yer ten minutes ter get through with it, John, and then I shall come back ter kiss yer both and lay the dinner. Good luck, my boy! (*she draws his face down and kisses him. Just as she is going off R., JOHN calls after her*)

JOHN. Mother!

MRS. C. (*turning*) Yes, John?

JOHN. I suppose you wouldn't think it better to—
to put it off for a bit?

MRS. C. (*returning*) Put it off? Bless the boy, where's the sense in that? You've got the farm—you must have a wife—here's the very girl—you've been courting her for more than seven year! Goodness knows how many pieces of apple-rind I've seen yer twizzle round yer head and drop over yer left shoulder,

and they all make the letter "C". No, my lad, there's no sense in putting it off. Besides, it isn't fair to Charity to keep her waiting any longer. You're not afraid, are yer?

JOHN. Oh, no, mother, not a bit.

MRS. C. Very well, then. Just put the question the way I told you, and before you know where you are you'll be as good as married. (*looks through window*). Here she is! I'm off!

(*Exit quickly R.*)

JOHN, *very nervous, straightens his tie and smoothes his hair. He is holding the whip all the time. CHARITY is seen passing the window. She is a fair, pretty girl in a white dress and sun-bonnet. She taps at the door. JOHN goes to open door—then stops, hesitating. CHARITY knocks again.*

JOHN. (*in a very weak voice*) Come in.

CHARITY *does not hear and knocks a third time.* MRS. COGBILL *thrusts her head in at door R.*

MRS. C. Open the door to 'er, you great zany!
(*Exit MRS. C.*)

JOHN *goes to door and opens it. There is a porch outside the door. Old MR. COGBILL is sitting in the porch, his hand resting on his stick. As JOHN opens the door, old MR. COGBILL is looking up into CHARITY'S face and saying, "Ay, there's noos right enough; there's noos right enough." Then he turns away and stares out across the meadows. He remains there when the door is shut and throughout the play.*

JOHN. Oh, good morning, Charity.

CHARITY. Good morning, John. (*she is carrying a basket*) I promised your mother some of our Victoria plums. We've more than we know what to do with this year. (*she comes in and JOHN closes the door*)

JOHN (*moving towards door R.*) I'll fetch her, shall I?

CHARITY. Oh, no, don't bother her now. I daresay she's busy with the dinner. I'll just leave them.

JOHN. Oh, thank you. She'll be very pleased. (*a pause*) Won't you—won't you sit down a moment?

CHARITY. Well, it must only be for a moment. (*sits*) What are you doing with that great whip?

JOHN. Just binding the handle a bit.

CHARITY. How did you break it? Not across poor Nancy's back, I hope?

JOHN. No. I caught it in the wheel of the gig.

CHARITY. You never really use it to whip Nancy with, do you?

JOHN. I give her a touch up, now and again.

CHARITY. What a shame! What brutes men are!

JOHN (*binding the whip*) What would you do, then, Charity, if you had to catch a train and she wouldn't get along fast enough?

CHARITY. Why, coax her, of course. (*he roars with laughter*) I don't think it's very polite of you to laugh at me.

JOHN (*very repentant*) I wasn't laughing at you, Charity. I was laughing to think of Nancy hurrying her stumps because somebody spoke pretty to her. (*she has her back to him*) You're not cross, are you?

CHARITY. I can't talk to you when you're right up there.

JOHN. Oh, I see. (*he gets a chair and sits near to her*) There: is that better?

CHARITY. Show me how you do that binding. It looks rather fascinating.

JOHN. Oh, you just twist it round and round, you know.

CHARITY. I don't know. I want you to show me.

JOHN. Like this. (*he binds*)

CHARITY. I should like to try. May I?

JOHN. Of course. (*he rises, and hands her the whip*)

CHARITY. But you must hold it for me. Bring your chair across.

(*He gets his chair and sits close to her. Their heads are bent over the whip, and their backs are to the window. MRS. COGBILL appears outside the window. She watches them for a few moments; then beams with pleasure, and wafts them some silent kisses. After a little while she goes away.*)

JOHN. Mind and not let it slip. Put your hand here. See?

CHARITY. Where?

JOHN. Just here. (*he takes her hand and places it on the whip*) That's right.

CHARITY. Exactly right?

JOHN. Near enough.

CHARITY. But I want it to be exactly right.

JOHN. Well, then, (*he moves her hand a little*) there, then.

CHARITY. Now show me what to do with the string.

JOHN. It'll make your hands sticky.

CHARITY. I don't mind that.

JOHN. But I do.

CHARITY. Whose hands are they, pray—mine or yours? (*she is binding the whip*)

(*JOHN, bracing himself for an effort, does not answer.*)

CHARITY. (*looking up*) That's a simple question. Can't you answer it?

JOHN. They're—they're yours.

CHARITY. (*binding viciously*) There you are, then. (*she gives the whip a sudden twitch and the lash goes near his face*). Oh, I'm so sorry. Did I hit you?

JOHN. No.

CHARITY. I'm so glad. (*a pause*) Besides, it isn't as though I had nice, white, delicate little hands, like some girls.

JOHN. But you have.

CHARITY. You mustn't flatter me. (*she takes one hand off the whip*) Look at that great coarse thing! Why, it's almost as big as yours!

JOHN (*laughing*) Not it! It isn't half the size!

CHARITY. I'm sure it is.

JOHN. I'll bet you it isn't then.

CHARITY. I don't see how we're to decide.

JOHN (*holding out his hand, very flat*). That's easy enough. We can measure.

CHARITY. Promise you won't squeeze my hand and hurt it?

JOHN. Of course I won't.

CHARITY. Promise faithfully?

JOHN. Faithfully.

CHARITY. Oh, well, I don't think we'll measure, after all. I want to get on with the whip. It's nearly done, isn't it?

JOHN. Yes. It only needs finishing off.

CHARITY. How do you finish it off?

JOHN. Just tuck the end in with a brad-awl.

CHARITY. Have you got one in your pocket?

JOHN. No. I shall have to fetch one from the barn.

CHARITY. If you asked me very nicely, I might come with you.

JOHN. Oh, no, you mustn't do that. You'd dirty your dress climbing the ladder.

CHARITY. It's dirty already. Still, of course, if you think I'd better not——

JOHN. You stay and talk to mother. I shan't be long. You won't go before I come back, will you?

CHARITY. I don't know. I might.

JOHN. I'll run.

(*He takes the whip and runs out by door C., which he leaves open. Old MR. COGBILL does not turn. Enter MRS. COGBILL by door R. She is smiling, and looking very arch and knowing. She comes down to CHARITY holding out both hands.*)

MRS. C. What, Charity, my dear, all alone? (*kisses her*)

CHARITY. John's just left me. I've been helping him to bind his whip.

MRS. C. That's right. And where's John off to in

such a hurry? I thought I caught a glimpse of him running across the yard as if the devil was after him.

CHARITY. He's gone to get a brad-awl or something to finish off the whip with.

MRS. C. (*anxiously*) You haven't quarrelled, have you?

CHARITY. Good gracious, no! Why should we quarrel, Mrs. Cogbill?

MRS. C. I don't know why you should, I'm sure. (*tenderly*) And I hope you never will, dearie.

CHARITY. I hope so, too.

MRS. C. John's a dear, good-tempered fellow, but the best of men are apt to be a little irritable at times, especially if their food isn't quite to their liking. You can't be too careful about what you give 'em to eat, Charity.

CHARITY. I'm sure nobody ever need complain on that score in this house, Mrs. Cogbill. You're such a wonderful cook?

MRS. C. Well, I can't pretend that my 'and's as light as it was, but I must admit that makin' tea-cakes, an' pastry, and puddings seems to come natural to me, just as it did to my poor mother. Not but what you've a nice light hand with a plain cake yourself, Charity. John's very fond of your cakes.

CHARITY. Is he?

MRS. C. Yes, that he is. By the way, you must remind me to give you my recipe for Farmhouse Pudding. There was a time when I used to say that I wouldn't never give it to nobody, and goodness knows the number that 'ave tried ter get it out of me! But things change as you get on in years, and you don't set so much store by things that used ter seem mighty important once upon a time. Yes, yes! I must give yer the recipe for Farmhouse Pudding.

CHARITY. I shall be very glad to have it, I'm sure.

MRS. C. (*going to cupboard R. and opening it*) I shall miss the cupboards in the Yew Barn House, but then, yer see, we shan't want so much storing space as all that, just me and daddy.

(CHARITY *sits silent, not knowing what to say and scarcely where to look*)

MRS. C. (*continuing*) Of course, it'll take yer a fairish time ter get used to the ways of things, and know just where to put yer 'and on the gooseberry jam in the dark, and where on the cabbage pickles. (*crosses to cupboard L.*) And then there's yer bacon to be salted, and yer pork-pies to be made, and yer cowslip wine and all that, not to mention the dairy work, and the pigs, and the poultry. (*closes door of cupboard and approaches CHARITY*) But I shan't be far away, yer see, and anything as I can tell yer—(*she stumbles over dustpan, stoops, picks it up, and crosses to door R.*) Annie! Where's that girl? Annie! (*opening door R., handing dustpan through*) Don't leave the dustpan lying about the parlor-floor that way, or anyone might trip over it and catch their head a fine old crack! Put it in the cupboard, my girl, and then catch up that tear in the bottom of yer skirt, or maybe you'll be takin' a dive into a pan o' milk. (*she returns to CHARITY and sits*) Let me see, was I sayin' anything? These girls keep one on the go so! Oh, yes, I know. I shan't be far away, and I daresay you'll find it convenient now and again to pop across and—

CHARITY. But—but you mustn't talk of leaving Nutlands for a long time yet.

MRS. C. (*staring at her in amazement*) Eh?

CHARITY. (*very embarrassed*) I say, you mustn't talk of leaving Nutlands for a long time yet, Mrs. Cogbill.

MRS. C. (*still staring*) D'you mean to say as John ain't told yer?

CHARITY. Told me? I don't understand. He hasn't told me anything in particular.

MRS. C. (*jumping up*) The great zany! D'you mean to say as he hasn't told yer that me and the old man 'ave decided to give up the farm come Michælmas?

CHARITY. He hasn't said a word about it, Mrs.

Cogbill. But, then, (*very demurely*) why should he?

MRS. C. (*giving her a sly dig in the ribs*) Oh, go along with yer, Miss Coy! You know well enough, and so does everybody in Littleworth, for that matter, as John's only bin waiting for me and the old man to give up the farm to ask you to marry him.

CHARITY. (*confused—turning away*) Oh!

MRS. C. Still, it's natural as you shouldn't let on as you knows about it until he pops the question. That's how I used to be myself, and most of the gals in my day, but they seem to have altered a fairish bit lately according to what I read in the papers. Not you, though, Charity. You wouldn't go pullin' the Prime Minister's nose! You're one of the oldfashioned sort, and all the better for it, to my way of thinking. You'll make a rare and good wife for our lad, and both on us knows it. Come! Give me a kiss, my dear? (*they kiss*) There! Now we'll go and look for 'im, and get this settled right away.

(*She takes CHARITY by the arm, and tries to lead her towards door c.*)

CHARITY. (*hanging back and eagerly protesting*) Oh, no, Mrs. Cogbill, I couldn't do that! Please don't ask me to! I'd much rather not, really, really!

MRS. C. But what's the matter, my dear? It'll all be over before you can say "Knife."

CHARITY. Oh, but whatever would he think of me, running after him and routing him out in that way?

MRS. C. Think of *you*? I'll pretty soon let him know what *I* think of *him*!

CHARITY. No, no! (*she wriggles free*) Far better wait a while, and let him take his own time about—about making a formal proposal—that is to say, if he wants to.

MRS. C. Go on with you! You know very well he wants to.

CHARITY. Well, at any rate, there's no hurry, you see; no hurry at all.

MRS. C. Oh, of course, you're young enough, and

so's John for that matter, but when people have bin courting seven years—

CHARITY (*crossing to elude* MRS. COGBILL) Isn't that all the more reason why we shouldn't spoil everything at the last by being too impetuous?

MRS. C. Not much fear of that. (*creeping up behind* CHARITY) The way you two carry on, anyone might think as you expected to live to be as old as Methuselah! Now, (*seizing her arm again*) you just step across the yard with me—

CHARITY. (*still hanging back*) Oh, but please listen! John may have changed his mind, Mrs. Cogbill. Men do such things, often and often. He may have met somebody he likes better than me—some very pretty, very smart girl, much more attractive in every way than me!

MRS. C. (*firmly*) Stuff and rubbish! (*letting her go*) I never heard such nonsense! John's a gentleman, I hope, for all that his father made his own way in the world!

CHARITY. (*up to* MRS. COGBILL.) Oh, I didn't mean—

MRS. C. I know that, my dear. But that you should get such a notion into your head! John's not the man to have his brain turned by any little minx with a dolly face and a pair of baby eyes. He knows well enough that you're the wife for him—the wife to cherish a man, and mend his clothes, and see that his food's well cooked, and take care of the pence, and keep the place in order, and sit with him before the fire of a winter's evening, and nurse him when he's sick, and, maybe, if God sees fit, give him some dear little children to scramble about his knees and protect him lovingly when he's too old to work for himself. (*CHARITY has turned away. MRS. COGBILL comes up behind her and puts an arm about her shoulders*) Change his mind? Not John, dearie! All he wants is a little help, a little encouragement, see?

CHARITY. Oh, but I—

(*Re-enter JOHN COGBILL, the whip in one hand and the
brad-awl in the other.*)

MRS. C. Ah, here he is, just in the nick of time!

CHARITY. Good-bye, Mrs. Cogbill. I'm afraid I must go now.

(*She slips round MRS. COGBILL towards door.*)

MRS. C. (*running after her and bringing her back*) Wait a bit, my dear. I won't keep yer above a couple of minutes.

CHARITY. But, really, I must get home at once! I shall be late for dinner as it is!

MRS. COGBILL. Well, two minutes more won't make such a deal of difference. (*she leads CHARITY down C. They meet JOHN COGBILL.*) John, I've been showing Charity the cupboards, and telling her a few of the things as keeps a woman busy about a farm.

(*During the following dialogue, CHARITY is always trying, without using force, to free herself, but MRS. COGBILL will not let go of her arm.*)

JOHN. (*busy with whip*) Ah?

MRS. C. Yes, that's what I've bin doing since you went out; haven't I, Charity?

CHARITY. (*trying to speak ordinarily*) Your mother must be a wonderful manager.

MRS. C. (*quickly*) And so 'll you be, one of these near days. What d'yer think, John?

JOHN. Ah, I should think so.

MRS. C. I've told her something else as well, John.

JOHN. Oh, indeed?

MRS. C. Yes. I've told her as me and'the old man are giving up the farm come Michaelmas.

JOHN. Ah?

CHARITY. I'm sure the two minutes are up, Mrs. Cogbill. I don't want to seem rude.

MRS. C. Well, you will. (*she tightens her grip*) I thought p'r'aps you'd have told 'er yourself, John, but it seems as you didn't.

JOHN. I had meant to, but—(*he pauses*)

MRS. C. Well? But what?

JOHN. It slipped my memory for the moment.

(MRS. COGBILL *laughs*. JOHN *looks at her sharply—then at CHARITY*. He goes on working at the whip.)

MRS. C. That's a nice thing to say, upon my word. But maybe you was thinking of something more important, eh, John?

JOHN. No, I can't call to mind that I was.

CHARITY (*to* MRS. COGBILL) Father will be so cross! You know how he hates to be kept waiting!

MRS. C. Do him good for once. (*to* JOHN) P'r'aps you was thinking of what this change would mean to you and—(CHARITY *struggles*)—and somebody else? Eh? Was that it?

JOHN. (*without raising his eyes*) Maybe I was.

MRS. C. Well, then, my boy, don't keep a lady waiting!

(*At this CHARITY gives a little cry, and, wrenching herself free at last, begins to move away. But MRS. COGBILL is too quick for her, and catches her by the skirt.*)

MRS. C. Don't you be a fool, my dear. (*she catches JOHN by the coat-tail*) And don't you be a fool, John, neither. Here be three people, with all of 'em the same thought in their minds, and all afraid to speak it out. John's the one as ought to speak by rights, but it appears to me that if we left it to him, you two might both live to be a hundred and never be any nearer bein' man and wife!

CHARITY (*turning away and murmuring*) Oh, please!

MRS. C. Well, that's true. Now, John, (*twitching violently at his coat-tail*) I've give yer an opening. 'Avent yer got nothing to say to Charity now?

JOHN. (*bravely*) Yes.

MRS. C. Ah! That's better!

CHARITY. No, no! I—

MRS. C. Shut up, yer little ninny! Come on, John.

JOHN (*after clearing his throat*) If she—if she cares to hear it now.

CHARITY. No, no! Some other time! I can't stay now! I—

MRS. C. (*clinging to her arm*) There's no time like the present. I'd go away and leave yer to get through it by yerselves, only I know well enough as you'd begin in talking about the weather, or something o' that. So come along, my lad. You'll have enough to say after you've taken the first plunge, I'll warrant.

JOHN *clears his throat a second time. Then he looks at the whip in one hand and the brad-awl in the other. He slips the brad-awl into his pocket. Still the whip is in the way. He makes as though to throw it down but changes his mind.*)

MRS. C. (*observing his dilemma*) Here, give me the whip, my lad.

(JOHN *gladly hands it over. Then he takes a firm stand, clears his throat a third time, and looks timidly at CHARITY. She has her back almost to him*)

JOHN. (*in a colloquial tone*) Charity!

(CHARITY *does not reply*).

MRS. C. (*encouragingly*) Good lad! That's the style. Good lad!

JOHN (*in the same tone as before*) Charity! May I—may I ask you a question?

(CHARITY *is still silent.*)

MRS. C. Of course you may! Bless my soul, she's not the Princess of Wales.

JOHN. I just wanted to know whether you—whether you— (*he stops*)

MRS. C. Well? Whether she what?

JOHN. Whether she—cared for me at all?

MRS. C. It's no use asking me, my boy. She's here, you know, and she's not deaf.

JOHN. Do you, Charity?

CHARITY. You know I'm very—— (*she stops*)

MRS. C. (*kindly*) Speak up, dearie.

CHARITY. I was going to say, he knows I'm very fond of him.

MRS. C. (*triumphant*) There you are! She's very fond of you.

CHARITY. Oh, but whatever's the time?

MRS. C. Half-past kissing time, and time to—time for John to come to the point.

JOHN. Do you——? (*he hesitates*)

MRS. C. Try 'will you.'

JOHN. Would you——

MRS. C. Not 'would you'—'will you.'

JOHN. Will you—that is to say, would you——

MRS. C. (*exasperated*) Oh, bless the boy! We shall be here all night!

JOHN. Would you care to——?

(MRS. COGBILL *shakes her head at him*)

JOHN. Eh?

MRS. C. All right. Put it in your own way.

JOHN. Would you care to—marry me at all?

(CHARITY *does not answer.*)

MRS. C. There you are! Pitch it in a bit stronger! (*she is speaking into his ear*) You don't suppose any gal worth having would bite at a bit of a bait like that, do yer?

(CHARITY *makes another attempt to escape.* MRS. COGBILL *frustrates it.*)

JOHN. I think you know that I—that I love you. Anyway, I want you to know it. And I want you to be my wife.

(*A pause.* CHARITY *does not turn.* MRS. COGBILL *realising that she is no longer wanted, looks up into JOHN'S face fondly, and squeezes his arm. Then she kisses CHARITY. Finally, she goes up stage, joins old MR. COGBILL in the porch, and tells him the*

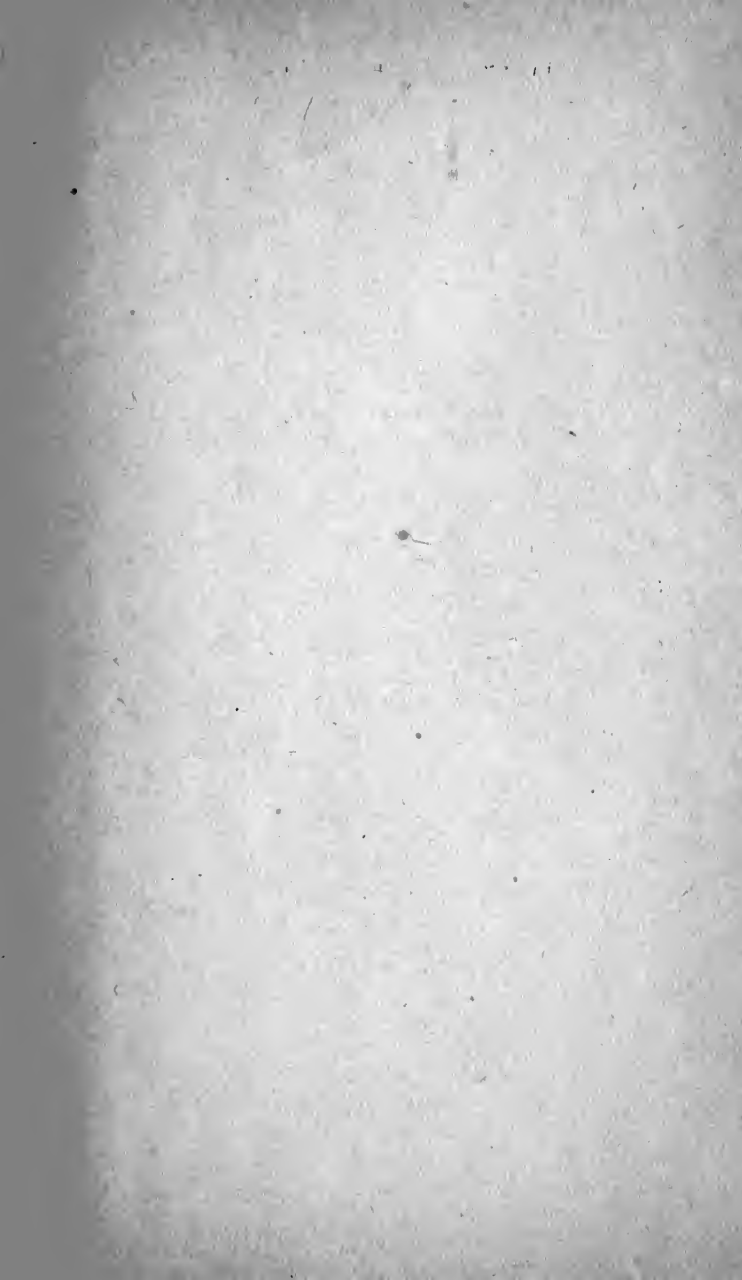
news. JOHN, with two great strides, is up to CHARITY. He puts his arm about her shoulders.)

CHARITY (*looking up at him*) Is it true?

(MRS. COGBILL *stands in the open doorway, looking at them. Old MR. COGBILL rises, and stands behind her, his arm about her waist and his hand over hers. He, too, is watching the young couple. JOHN replies to CHARITY'S question with a nod. She buries her face against his chest. He looks at audience and gives a great sigh of relief.*)

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

(*At second curtain, JOHN'S face is buried in the hood of CHARITY'S sun-bonnet.*)



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(COPY DEL TO CAT. DIV.

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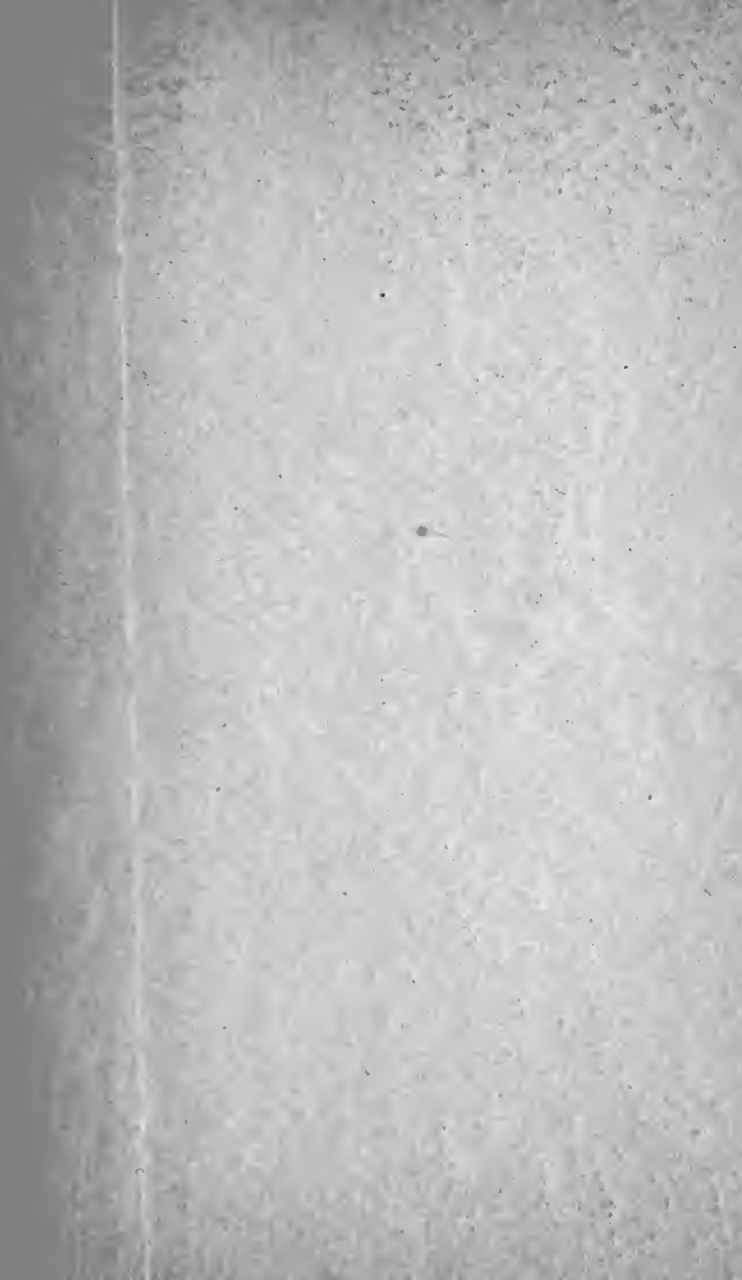
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